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VDH ADVISES OF HEALTH RISK FROM PET RODENTS

(RICHMOND, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is asking pet store owners that sell rodents such as mice, hamsters and guinea pigs to take extra precautions to limit the spread of *lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus* (LCMV). LCMV is usually carried by wild house mice, but can also affect pet rodents. Those pet rodents can then pass the infection on to humans.

If you currently own or are considering purchasing a pet rodent, or if you have a problem with wild rodents occupying your home, VDH recommends safeguarding yourself and your family from this disease, especially if anyone in your household is pregnant or immunocompromised. Although human infection is rare, there can be serious consequences for the unborn child of a pregnant woman infected during the first or second trimester. Similarly, those with weakened immune systems or individuals preparing to donate organs should also avoid contact with wild and pet rodents.

Health officials have become increasingly concerned with LCMV since May when, in New England, an infection passed from a pet rodent to an organ donor and resulted in the deaths of three recipients of the donated organs. The infection was traced back to a pet rodent distributor in Ohio who supplies hamsters and guinea pigs to chain and independent pet stores in several states, possibly including Virginia.

Pet rodents can become infected with LCMV after coming in contact with wild rodents at a breeding facility, pet store, or at home. Humans can develop LCMV infection from exposure to urine, droppings, saliva, or nesting material of infected rodents. Most people who become infected with the virus do not become ill. Those who do fall ill may experience symptoms such as fever, stiff neck, lack of appetite, muscle aches, headache, nausea, and vomiting. Symptoms occur one to two weeks after exposure and are usually short in duration.

“Although the risk of humans becoming infected with LCMV is low, and the risk of becoming sick from infection is even lower, pet store owners and those in high-risk categories must take precautions to limit the spread of this disease,” said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H.

At present there is no way to determine how many or which pet rodents are infected with LCMV. The only reliable test for LCMV in rodents requires that the animals be dead. The investigations at the Ohio distributor and the pet store where the donor bought the implicated rodent identified a small proportion of hamsters and a guinea pig as infected (3 percent of pet rodents tested). There is no way to know what percentage, if any, of other pet rodents are infected. Studies on house mice have shown that anywhere from three to 40 percent are infected.

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Testing healthy people for LCMV is not necessary. Similarly, testing people with previous history of LCMV-compatible illness generally is not useful. People who have been exposed to wild or pet rodents and show symptoms of LCMV should seek medical care.

Pet rodent owners should take the following precautions to limit their risk of infection:

- Wash hands with soap and water after handling any rodents or cleaning up pet droppings. Use waterless alcohol-based hand sanitizers when soap is not available.
- Keep pet rodent cages clean and free of soiled bedding. During cleaning, wear rubber, latex, vinyl or nitrile gloves and wash hands thoroughly when you are done. Clean the cage in a well-ventilated area or outside. Once the cage is clean of solid material, rinse it with a dilute bleach solution (one and one-half cups of bleach to one gallon of water) or another household disinfectant.
- Closely supervise young children when cleaning cages, and make sure children wash their hands immediately after handling rodents and rodent caging or bedding.
- Do not kiss pet rodents or hold them close to your face.
- Pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems should avoid contact with any rodents. If you have a household mouse infestation, it should be addressed promptly by a professional pest control company or another member of the household.
- Pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems should keep pet rodents in a separate part of the home and ask another family member or friend to clean the cage and care for the pet.

House mice are the primary carriers of this virus, not pet rodents. If you have a rodent infestation in and around your home, VDH recommends that you take the following precautions to reduce the risk of LCMV infection:

- Seal up rodent entry holes or gaps with steel wool, metal lath or caulk.
- Trap rats and mice by using an appropriate snap trap.
- Clean up rodent food sources and nesting sites and take precautions when cleaning rodent-infected areas.
- Keep wild rodents away from pet rodents.
- Wash hands with soap and water after handling any rodents or cleaning up droppings. Use waterless alcohol-based hand sanitizers when soap is not available.

Pet rodent owners who are concerned about LCMV are reminded not to release unwanted pet rodents into the wild. This increases the risk of infection in wild rodent populations and is an inhumane way to dispose of unwanted house pets.

If you wish to give a pet rodent to another family, be sure they are aware of proper handling procedures and instructions. If you are unable to find the rodents a good home, you should discuss humane disposal of the animal with your veterinarian.

For more information about pet rodent handling instructions, an overview of LCMV, and tips on how to keep your family safe from animal-borne diseases, visit www.vdh.virginia.gov and click on the link for Disease Information and Prevention. Additional information about LCMV can also be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/spb/mnpages/dispages/lcmv.htm>.